

# OPEN AND SHUT?



Friday, December 16, 2005

## A real tragedy

In writing my recent article about the Royal Society's position statement on open access I contacted a number of Fellows of the Society, including some of those who had written an open letter objecting to the "largely negative stance" taken in the statement.

After publishing the article I received an e-mail from Professor Richard Roberts, chief scientific officer at **New England Biolabs**. Professor Roberts, who signed the open letter, had been travelling when I e-mailed my questions to him, so I was unable to incorporate his views into the article. Given the degree of interest that the Royal Society's position statement has generated I thought there would be value in publishing Professor Robert's response separately.

Professor Roberts is a **Nobel Laureate**, a Fellow of the Royal Society, a research editorial board member for the open access journal **PLoS Biology**, and senior executive editor of the journal **Nucleic Acids**, which is published by **Oxford University Press** and in January 2005 became the first traditional journal to go open access.

**Q:** Why did you sign the letter to the Royal Society?

**A:** I signed the letter because it expressed my own sentiments perfectly. I am a strong advocate of open access, and write about it and speak in favour of it whenever possible. I was appalled when I first read the Royal Society's statement.

**Q:** The Royal Society says that the open letter is based on a misunderstanding, since the Royal Society's position statement is only a re-statement of views it published on 24th November, and that these views were arrived at after extensive discussions that took place in February 2004. At that time these views were also approved by the Council for the Royal Society. Were you aware of those discussions? Did you take part in them? Did you object at the time?

**A:** The first I heard of this was when BioMed Central's Matt Cockerill sent me the statement. I had personally contacted the Royal Society about this issue several years ago and had spoken with **Lord May** [the former president of the Royal Society] about it. I was basically brushed off. However, I was not consulted or even forewarned of this statement.

In fact, I first drew the attention of this matter to the Royal Society in January 2001 (almost five years ago). At that time I had written an editorial piece for **PNAS** about open access and was lead author, and main protagonist, of a letter to **Science** about the issue. Now they call for a study — just 5 years too late!

**Q:** The Royal Society says that it has adopted its position on open access partly because of concerns raised by the mathematics, chemistry and physics communities within the Society, and that most of the signatories of the letter are from the life sciences. Is that your understanding?

**A:** I know that most of the signatories are from the life sciences. I have no knowledge of who has expressed opinions against open access. However, I would note that the physicists have had a form of open access of pre-publication results for a long time (thanks to **Paul Ginsparg** and his **preprint server**). The chemists seem to be held hostage by the **American Chemical Society**, which makes exorbitant charges for its journals and has firmly opposed open access, even to its older publications.

**Q:** The Royal Society says that the letter has been signed by just "a small number of the 1,274 Fellows." Is it fair to view the letter as representing only a minority view amongst Royal Society Fellows?

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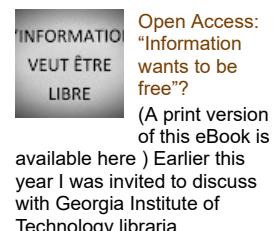
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**A:** We won't know if it is a minority view because the Society has never been polled on this issue. Furthermore, I am still surprised that many scientists, and I suspect many Fellows of the Royal Society, are not even aware of the issue, or have not given it any real thought — so for such a poll to be effective there would need to be some education of the participants.

**Q:** How would you like to see the Royal Society respond to the letter?

**A:** I would have hoped to see a more conciliatory position taken and especially I would have liked to see some action. For the last three years there have been lots of words, basically opposing open access by calling for studies or more thought, but no actions. My mother taught me that actions speak louder than words.

**Q:** Has the Royal Society lost touch with its Fellows on this issue?

**A:** I think that the Royal Society has not only lost touch with its Fellows on this issue, but is out of touch with the pace of the younger scientists whose interests it should be looking after. Most young scientists don't even know where the library is these days. If they can't access the literature from their computer then it might as well not exist for them. So much for seeing farther by standing on the shoulders of giants! This is a real tragedy.

**Q:** The Royal Society's approach to open access is in stark contrast to that of the Wellcome Trust (which has mandated its funded researchers to make their papers open access). Why do you think that is? And what does the contrast signify?

**A:** This question gets to the heart of the matter. The Wellcome Trust has been bold and imaginative, and is to be applauded. I would note that they have no financial interests in opposing open access. The Royal Society by its own admission makes some profits from its publications, as do many scientific societies. If you really want to know why people do things I always think that one should follow the money first.

Posted by Richard Poynder at 10:25



## 5 comments:

Anonymous said...

Interesting to read Professor Robert's interview. As a Ph.D. in physics from the UK who moved to biology after arriving at MIT, I was a little stunned to find out from my colleagues there that hardly any major biology paper, describing breakthrough ideas, is submitted to the Proceedings of the Royal Society these days. It is all Nature, Cell, Science and the PNAS. I am sure a lot of other life scientists, including myself, are not too worried about open access of the Royal Society publications. In case the readers think I am biased, I request references be looked up in major journal dealing with life sciences.

January 11, 2006 5:21 am

Richard Poynder said...

Thank you for your comment. It may be that biologists now prefer journals like *Science*, *Nature*, *Cell* and the *PNAS* over those of the Royal Society. If they do, however, then this surely reflects a disenchantment with the Society unconnected with open access — since with the exception of *PNAS* these other journals are no more receptive to OA than the Royal Society.

But clearly there are connections between a journal's OA policy and its popularity. A paper published a few days ago by the *BMJ*, for instance, shows that many *BMJ* authors are attracted by the journal's OA policy, and would be less likely to submit work to the *BMJ* if it were a subscription-based journal. See also Peter Suber's post on this.

January 12, 2006 10:11 am

Stevan Harnad said...

Richard Poynder wrote:

"[regarding] *Science*, *Nature*, *Cell* and the *PNAS*... with the exception of *PNAS* these other journals are no more receptive to OA than the Royal Society."

Unfair to *Science*, *Nature* and *Cell* (Elsevier)!

Alternatives , explained why he believes the var...



PLOS CEO Alison Mudditt discusses new OA agreement with the University of California

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\*\*\*Update: On August 26th 2016, the US government (Federal Trade Commission) announced that it has charged OMICS with making false claims, ...



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We are today seeing growing dissatisfaction with the pay-to-publish model for open access. As this requires authors (or their funders or ins...

All three are, like PNAS (and RSI), already among the 93% of journals that are "green" on OA self-archiving

<http://romeo.eprints.org/>

(although *Nature* did rather cravenly -- and opportunistically -- back-slide to "pale-green" [embargoed postprint archiving] immediately upon the announcement of the ill-fated NIH embargoed access policy in January 2005).

<http://www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Hypermail/Amsci/4312.html>

**Stevan Harnad**

January 12, 2006 4:13 pm

**Anonymous said...**

I think the central issue is being missed here. The fact is, as I had mentioned earlier, Royal Society Proceedings have, over the years, become less important, at least for life sciences, compared to many other journals. This is certainly the case in the US and also in Europe. Therefore, the question of open access (OA) become a little irrelevant. Personally, I think, for developing and poor countries, OA is still an excellent idea for all major scientific journals. Subscription to some of these journals is outrageous, to say the least. I wish all sensible publishers would take this point into account before they set their subscription level. What is the point of making it very difficult for scientists from such countries getting free access to the important journals in a reasonably short time?

January 13, 2006 6:51 am



**Jane Smith said...**

It's true that *Phil Trans B (Biosciences)* has lost its broad appeal and now carries almost exclusively behavioural, ecological and evolutionary biology (particularly evolutionary genetics) articles. But in those fields it is still considered to be a journal of high repute, and one to be seen in.

Indeed, the Royal Society found *Phil Trans B (Biosciences)* articles were being submitted in these areas in sufficient numbers in recent years that in 2004 it launched a spin-off journal called *Biology Letters*. While this was launched as a dependent part of *Phil Trans B*, it proved so successful that the next year it was given independent status, with its own editor and editorial staff. The journal's "Aims & Scope" says that it covers all of biology, but it largely mirrors *Phil Trans B* in what it is actually publishing.

And while it is true that major breakthroughs in biology are published in *PNAS*, *Science*, *Nature* and *Cell*, that is because it is in the areas of biology (cellular and molecular) covered by those journals that breakthrough science has been happening. If, on the other hand, some major advance is made in behavioural genetics it is very likely to be reported in *Phil Trans B*.

In short, the Royal Society's journals are far from defunct. While in some fields of biology the Society hardly registers on the radar its journals are still held to be very prestigious in certain fields (though not all). And given its continuing importance in behavioural, ecological and evolutionary biology I would argue that it is very important that the Royal Society gets on board the open access train -- and the sooner the better!

January 13, 2006 11:32 am

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